The Body in Indian Classical Tradition – Analyzing Ilango Adigal's *Shilappadikaram*

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Abstract: *The term Shilappadikaram incorporates two words, silambu and adikaram, literally assuming the meaning, 'the tale of an anklet or silambu'. Interestingly a silambu draws our attention to the woman's body that must be lived in a particular cultural ethos to adorn itself with an anklet, and give the opportunity to the author to base his story around the same. This paper seeks to engage itself with the sociology of embodiment in the context of Indian Classical literary tradition, helping us to understand how bodies were formulated, not only in physical and psychological space, but also in cultural, social and literary domains. This paper through an analysis of Ilango Adigal's Tamil epic Shilappadikaram, seeks to work on a paradigm of embodiment, in the context of Tamil and interrelated Sanskrit aesthetics. The paper is not on a 'finding' spree, nor is a study of anything new or different; rather addresses a familiar issue as to how literature sees lives to be shaped; but from a different standpoint of highlighting human bodies to be the markers of social and cultural information and integration. The model of the human bodies as represented here, with their expressive equipments such as appearance, dress, demeanor or even sexuality are shown to be a part of the social and cultural history; providing an interface between aesthetics and reality.*

Keywords: *Aesthetics, body, breast, Kannaki, Kovalan, Tamil*

Introduction

It is our bodies that lend us existence and the materiality of our existence is a certainty that the classical Indian writers effectively understood. Therefore we see a predominance of the human body in ancient Hindu religion, philosophy, mythology, literature, art, architecture, and even culture, in general. Rigvedic *Purusha-sukta*hymn even talks of the universe emanating, not from the formless Holy Ghost, but out of the sacrificial body of the *Ideal Male*. Every aspect of the cosmos emerges out of a specific part of His body: Moon from His mind, Sun from the eyes, fire gurgles out of the mouth, wind from His breath, space from the navel, the pantheon of gods from His head, and the mortal world from His feet. Vedic imagination manifested itself around a perfect bodily form, which is the source of all elegance and efficacy in both life and literature (Dehejia 2009: 18). The important point that must be taken note of is that, the image of the body is centrally important to Indian thought process, frequently overlapping and intersecting with the loftiest philosophical ideology as well as with human erotic fantasies. The body is a major trope of Indian classical aesthetics, and this essay, through an exploration of an ancient Tamil epic of the Sangam era, Ilango Adigal's *Shilappadikaram*, stresses the primacy of the human body in the artistic and literary tradition of India. I intend to consider the linkages between body, desire and sexuality, chastity and religiosity, and how these point to the socially, emotionally and individually constructed body of Indian art and literature. This essay represents the 'idealized human body' as cultural foci permeating both the Aryan and Dravidian cultures, and a site around which pre-modern Indian poetics evolves.

Connoisseurs of art and literature in pre-modern India

Indian art and literature was elitist in intent, targeting a select coterie of audience consisting of the aristocrats and refined men of the town. The urbane canvas captured not the mundane world of peasant and workers, but the larger-than-life world of royalty or the divine courts of the Gods, submerged in the dalliance of love. The world of the laity was either obliterated or partially portrayed, only in the context of its interaction with this idealized world of gods and monarchs.

These specialists not only harbored a cultured taste but also demanded experimentation with form and content. Nothing was screened from the purview of art; and this frankness brought about the centrality of the well-enunciated human body as a primary 'alankara' (ornament) of both the sacred and profane Indian art and aesthetics. The beauty of the body and its erotic appeal was so often the marker, against which the poets visualized the entire cosmos. Inanimate

objects also came to be described in terms of the body. The body with all its sacred and sensuous appeal turned out to be a major leitmotif in the literary imagination of classical India.

Experimentation with and representation of the body became an expression of the collective consciousness of the Indian milieu, that literature wanted to uphold as authentic. The centrality of the body in Indian aesthetics proved to be a cognitive mode of understanding our long-standing association to community feeling and socially shared cultural knowledge. Body in literature provided experiences of synchrony emoting collective consciousness within individual psyche.

Classical poetics and the importance of the Body

The perceptive consumers of pre-modern Sanskrit, Tamil or other vernacular literatures recognized the aesthetic value of art and an importance of a well formulated poetics to embellish such creative outputs. It is usually considered that Sanskrit and Tamil poetics are unallied disciplines, yet a sketchy discussion of both, reveals the importance that such poetics placed on the notion of the body. In this paper I will distill the essence of both Sanskrit and non-Sanskrit traditions to represent a well informed perspective about body.

Pre-modern Indian literary poetics is primarily identified by the Sanskrit 'rasa' theory, explicated by Bharata in his *Natya-Shastra*, giving prominence to our experience of thought, feeling and emotions. *Rasa* takes cognizance of the profound awareness that art evokes, be it fine arts or literature. *Rasa* theory is built around the human emotion of empathy: the artist's ability to empathize with the emotional state of the characters (*bhavas*), and on a secondary level, the audience's capability to empathize with such expressions as part of a heightened aestheticism. *Rasas* were initially eight in numbers, evocative of its concomitant *bhavas*: comic (*hasya*) creating mirth (*hasa*), pathetic (*karuna*) invoking sorrow (*shoka*), terrible (*bhayanaka*) eliciting fear (*bhaya*), odious (*bibhatsa*) extorting disgust (*jugupsa*), furious (*raudra*) rousing anger (*krodha*), heroic (*virya*) stirring up energy (*utsaha*), wondrous (*adbhuta*) raising astonishment (*vismaya*), and the erotic (*shringara*) conjuring love (*rati*). Later, a ninth *rasa* - the latent (*shanta*), with its analogous *bhava* of aplomb (*shama*) - was incorporated into literary practice. The erotic *rasa* of *shringara*is considered to be the epitome of *rasas* and has high recurrence in both fine arts and literature. What appears to be of unique importance is the human body through which the *rasas* and their attendant *bhavas* are enunciated and experienced.

The body becomes more important in articulation of emotions in Tamil literary spaces, where the entire literary vista emotes with her. The Tamil literary worldview is effectively expressed in *Tholkappiyam*, a set of essential theoretical tools for exploring of Sangam literature. *Tholkappiyam* describes poetry in terms of *mutal* – the first premise which is place and time, of *karu* – the seed level that indicates the association between the microcosmic human world and the macrocosmic universe at large and *uri* – the crucial theme that represents the important actions of love or war. Ramanujan have termed *mutal* – first elements, *karu* – native elements, and *uri* – human element (Mangalam 2016: 6).

Dehejia (2009) in his book *The Body Adorned*, effectively summarizes the categorization of Tamil poems that have been made by scholars:

> These poems are of two categories - either the *akam* love genre or the *puram* war genre. Central to the *akam* corpus is the concept of the five *tinais* (contexts) that have geographical, spatial, temporal, and emotional connotations. *Kurinchi,* the fertile hilly tract that signifies lovers' union, has at its opposite extreme the *palai* (desert wasteland), which connotes separation. In between are varying love experiences with the *mullai* (forest region), which suggests uncomplaining anticipation of the lover's return; the salty, sandy *neytal*, which indicates lamenting the lover's absence; and the *marutam* (fertile plains), which signals jealous quarreling (Dehejia 2009: 15).

Common to both Sanskrit and Tamil poetics is the importance laid on describing the human body, be it masculine or feminine, corporeal or divine. This technique is known as *nakh-sikh* (toenail to crest in Sanskrit and *padali-kesha* (foot-first to hair) in Sanskritic Tamil. A distinction is often followed between description of heavenly beings, where the view rests primarily on the divine feet, and that of human, starting with the face (Dehejia 2009: 16).

The intended and perceived body in *Shilappadikaram*

In this article I intend to explore a lesser known indigenous epic, *Shilappadikaram*, which negotiates the public and private modes of expression – *akam* and *puram*, in its exploration of the cult of the 'body'. Human beings are embodied in a socio-cultural and political context, and a literary text provides an extension to that experience. *Shilappadikaram* demonstrates how bodies are viewed and shaped across Indian history and culture, and in return how they turn out to be communicative bodies of literature, articulating a culture's embodied experience through depictions and self projections, adornments, rituals, and relationship dynamics. The revealed body becomes a space of socialized subjectivity in Indian art and literature generating inter-subjective grounds of cultural experience.

The Indian literary scene emotes with the beautiful bodies of men and women. Poets placed immense importance in describing the female body in minute details, almost at times verging on the erotic. Bodily beauty and its exploration is not only a part of Indian lifestyle, but it also becomes a site of contextual exploration in Indian artistic medium. The ways in which sacred and sensuous boundaries and descriptions overlap, is only demonstrative of the liberal mindset of pre-modern India, where aesthetic drive could propel the artist to celebrate the nubile body for its own sake. A description of Kannaki, the protagonist of the text, by her husband Kovalan when she is part of the *akam* phase of life, is demonstrative of my point:

> Beloved! To appear more handsome before the gods, Shiva adorned his brow with the fair crescent of the moon, but he lost this crown when the moon became your pale forehead. The limbless god of love gave up his bow to make your dark eyebrows, for is it not the law of war that the victor takes his weapon from the vanquished?
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> 'Leaving the gods at the mercy of the demons, Indra their king gave up his double- trident thunderbolt, that your waist might be wrought from its steel, for you are a treasure rarer than the life of the immortals. Against his nature, the beauteous young Murugan, six- faced god of war, gave up his fiery arrowheads so that your long eyes with their blood- red inner corners might frighten away the dark clouds of your hair. Shamed by your complexion, the peacock ran into the woods to hide his jewelled robes. Radiant maiden, your sinuous walk so shamed the swan that now he stays hidden among the cool lotuses in the ponds. 'To hear your voice, soft as the ancient harp called yal and sweeter than nectar, the green parrot keeps silent. Woman of noble gait, he perches, drunk with pleasure, on the flower of your hand (Adigal 1965: 141)[1].

The lush body of Indian poetic tradition was always a body embellished. *Alankara* (ornamentation) always added final elegance to the body in art. *Alankara* included dress and adornment (*shingara*), transforming the body into an object of desire, evocative of erotic *rasa.* The well shaped young body of Indian women is also garnished with fine fabric, ornaments, flowers and traditional cosmetics. The adornment of the body follows a range of conventions, that might be termed as 'body culture', including "body oils, pastes, cosmetics, fragrances, dress and hair coiffure. Anything applied to the body – garments (*vastra*), perfumes (*gandha*), ornaments (*alamkara*) or garlands (*mala*) – was considered to 'adorn it' " (Ali 2004: 167). The description of Madhavi, the other woman in

Kovalan's life, clearly illustrates the body culture predominant in Indian poetic tradition:

> To please him, Madhavi bathed her fragrant black hair, soft as flower petals, in oil mixed with ten kinds of astringents, five spices, and a blend of thirty-two pungent herbs. She dried it in the smoke of incense and anointed each tress with heavy musk paste. She then adorned her tiny feet, their soles dyed red, with well- chosen rings on each of her slender toes. She loaded her ankles with jewellery made of small bells, rings, chains, and hollow anklets. She elaborately ornamented her shapely thighs, fastened round her hips a girdle of thirty rows of pearls set on blue silk and embroidered with figures and flowers. Armlets studded with pearls, and bangles made of carved precious stones, embraced her arms. Priceless bracelets, on which rare stones were set among sparkling diamonds, shone over the fine down on her wrists. Above and below the bracelets she wore slender circlets, too, some of fine gold, others of the nine auspicious gems, still others of coral beads, and one of pearls. Her rosy fingers, delicate as kantal flowers, disappeared under ornaments shaped like fish- jaws, and under rings of dark rubies and flawless diamonds. Her frail throat was adorned with a chain of gold, exquisitely wrought, and with a garland. She wore also an ornament of precious stones, held by a loop, which covered the nape of her neck and her shoulders, as well as earrings of emeralds and diamonds. Shell- like jewels called *shidevi, toyyakam*, and *pullakam* were woven into her black tresses (Ali 2004: 412).

Akam, or the exploration of the personal/ private, lay importance to sexual union to denote not only bodily but also spiritual fulfillment. Nowhere in literature of the world, eroticism has been frankly accepted as a part of the literary ethos, as in India. It is quite evident in pre modern Indian literature that man-woman relationship, their mutual love and total assimilation into each other was of crucial significance, highlighting not only personal potency but also social stability, contentment and collective prosperity. In the following excerpts, the bodily beauty and intimacy of a couple, moving towards a description of orgiastic involvement of the bodies in experiencing of *kama* is of primary importance in understanding the sociology of body in Indian culture:

> The couch of Madhavi was strewn with wild blossoms from the forest, fragrant jasmine, and odorous petals. In the love chamber she seemed unaware that her girdle was undone and her thin garment slipping from her lovely hips. Lustful, she came out onto the terrace bathed in moonlight. All night only loving quarrels would interrupt the passionate embraces of Kovalan (Ali: 2004: 249).

> Madhavi was not the only one blessed with love's sweet joys. The breeze gently caressed many a lotus-eyed woman lying voluptuously against the strong chest of her lord. Before falling asleep, the women burned incense, blending the white ayir from the western hills with the black agar from the east. They anointed their bodies with sandalwood paste from the southern mountains, crushed on northern sandstone. They wore garlands of leaves, twined with lotus stalks and blossoms, and blue water lilies interwoven with strings of pearls. In the ardour of love, the pollen fell on beds strewn with fragrant petals (Adigal 1965: 252).
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> Women, their eyes darkened with collyrium, their young breasts firm and round, passionately embraced the warriors whose swords had led them to victory and who were now returned from their adventure wearing palm garlands, gold chains, and flower wreaths. Some had had their chests pierced through by the sharp tusks of furious elephants, some showed deep scars made by a sword's sharp edge, some had had their lustrous breasts struck by painful arrows, and some had had their broad shoulders, now adorned with wreaths, split by lances (Adigal 1965: 2464).

The erotic intimacy is evocative of *rati*or love, and is an important phase of life, usually identified as *grihastha*. Renouncement of pleasure was hardly encouraged; rather it was believed that *kama* (sexual pleasure) was a necessary aspect of life to be cultivated on an individual's way to the final spiritual echelon, that is, *moksha*. The Tamil child saint (*nayanar*) Sambandar extols such a worldview as he sang of lord Shiva and his divine consort, Uma:

> *"Here, on this good earth, you may lead a life of joy*
> *living each day in fulness -*
> *indeed this hinders not the goal of liberation"* (as in Dehejia 19).

This holistic attitude toward life finds a befitting example in the text, where the poet candidly describes the mad pursuit of *kama:* "Hands on their generous hips, these virgins gyrated madly as if possessed by obscene devils, and then in a circle performed the dance of lust, the Rasa Lila, which the god Krishna had performed with the cowgirls" (Adigal 1965: 294).

The Tamil tradition categorized women into several categories depending on their age and sexual experience, from innocent girls or *petai* to the blooming and sexually experienced *perilampen.* Sexual growth and experience always focused on highlighting the plump breasts, always protruding and amply touching each

other: "Gentle maidens with timid looks laid fragrant spices and odorous blossoms at their feet. Matrons with ample breasts and gleaming plaited hair carried scented powders, sandalwood paste, and incense" (Adigal 1965: 113).

Pre modern poets knew about fashion and its inextricable link to the body. Fashion was shaped, upheld and worn by bodies. It was to body that society spoke to, and it was the body that was dressed for almost all social interactions. Within eastern life and aesthetics, fashion structured much of people's experience of one's own body. *Shingara* (adornment), that was part of Indian lifestyle and aesthetics, was not only dress and ornaments, but also representation of the body through gestures and gait, at a given moment that could be considered to be apt at that particular moment. In my study of 'bodies' in the Indian classical tradition, I pay special attention to the raw materials that were used to adorn the body. To understand classical aesthetics' perception about bodies, we need to understand the relationship between the raw material and its emotional import on the body, operating within the Indian mindset. The following description of Madhavi, takes into consideration the production of a fashionable body, in tune with the emotional demands of the situation:

> After her break with Kovalan in the flowery pleasure grove by the sea, blossom- eyed Madhavi came back alone to her rich home, and climbed to her summer refuge, a tower near the sky. For her own pleasure, the elegant girl decked her heavy, saffron- powdered breasts with *pearls from the southern sea* and *sandal from the hills*. Holding her faultless harp, she sang a tender melody that filled her heart with grief. Then, to forget, she sat in the lotus posture (Adigal 1965:739) [My italics].

Ample breast and eyes like lotus petal or a fish, appealed to Indian imagination, and was considered the epitome of beauty. The darting quality of the eyes was very important to Indian aesthetics:

> These wild Karunatars wore the picturesque dress of their country. The girls had twined lustrous garlands in their long black wavy hair. Their young breasts were adorned with golden chains. Their long eyes were curved like a graceful carp" (Adigal 1965 : 2273).
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> A delegation came also from Kudagu, another part of the Chera empire, bringing dancing girls with rich bracelets and rolling carp- shaped eyes (Adigal 1965: 2278).

Male body, primarily the body of the monarch was extremely crucial in negotiating the *akam* and *puram* worldview within a Tamil text. The king's prowess in battle, holiness and gentility in social and spiritual domains always